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WARS
The battle
between titans
heats up

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Though the battle between smoking and anti-smoking forces has been around for hundreds of years, 1988 has seen the clash escalate as never before. A look at the most recent public relations strategies being employed by the mega-forces on each side.

By Joe Cosco

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Counting clips—long the mainstay of public relations program evaluation—is finally giving way to more sophisticated research techniques, ranging from computerized analysis of media coverage to attempts to measure impact on sales. A research professional presents an overview of cutting-edge methods taking hold in the field.

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FEEDBACK



Lessons unlearned

Your story on the Suzuki Samurai crisis (September, page 19) is evidence that no matter how much has changed in the last 20 years, public relations is often mired in a time warp.

The crisis planners at Suzuki had a perfect model to draw upon in responding to the roll-over charge. Back in the sixties, an unknown young lawyer named Ralph Nader wrote a book titled *Unsafe at Any Speed*, which alleged serious safety flaws in the then-popular General Motors Corvair. GM responded precisely the way Suzuki did—with a slashing counter-offensive in which all allegations were denied and the integrity of the messenger was impugned.

At the time, I wrote to General Motors with a piece of friendly advice: hire the young lawyer and make him Director of Quality Control. General Motors chose to continue in its chosen path, until Nader became a national hero. The company was ultimately forced to discontinue the Corvair despite its public relations efforts.

It is troubling to see how little the automotive industry (and some public relations counselors) learn from experience. True, it's a bit late now to offer Nader a job. But there were other comparable steps that Suzuki could have taken. Of course, they require a different mind-set.

First, public relations professionals need not instinctively strike out when clients or employers have been called to task. Public relations people are not mouthpieces or flacks. Hopefully, they are counselors with the responsibility to advise clients or employers which action is in their best long-term

interests.

Second, it's important to operate on the principle that public relations and publicity are not synonymous. Good publicity results from good performance. When the performance is not up to par, no amount of aggressive publicity can overcome it.

Third, largely because of its own shortcomings, the business community does not enjoy the same credibility as do consumer organizations. In particular, *Consumer Reports* magazine is a national icon precisely because people (consumers) look to it as an impartial testing organization. In any contest between a corporation and *Consumer Reports*, the magazine is going to win. Suzuki did itself no good by asking the public to choose between its credibility and that of the magazine's.

Fourth, as Winston Churchill said, "It's better to jaw, jaw, jaw than war, war, war." If Suzuki did indeed believe that the magazine's findings were erroneous or biased, the way to prove it was not to cite its own tests. Suzuki should have contacted highly respected consumer experts in the automotive field and asked them to review the data and/or set up independently verifiable roll-over tests.

Suzuki really had nothing to lose by taking this approach. If the consumer advocates had declined to participate, they would have been painted as biased by the media. If the tests backed up Suzuki's claims, the crisis would have ended long ago. And, if the independent tests showed that *Consumer Reports* was right, Suzuki would be no worse off than it is now. In fact, it would have gained credibility by being willing to submit to the tests instead of reacting defensively. If the vehicle is, indeed, a safety hazard, Suzuki will have to pull it off the market anyway.

Unfortunately, many practitioners believe in what I call "macho management." They look at any effort to reach out and build bridges to adversaries as soft-headed, or even socialistic. Yet this is the best way to help shape change instead of being swept away by it.

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The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is an individual membership professional society of 14,265 public relations practitioners. Its major services to members include programs of Professional Development and Accreditation, an Information Center, publications, tracking of issues of national concern, and promotion of ethical practice through adherence to PRSA's "Code of Professional Standards." PRSA's mission is "To serve the public need for understanding and cooperation among its diverse interests by fostering high professional and ethical standards for all those practicing public relations."

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MANAGEMENT

Financial Skills: Missing in Action

Although new public relations managers tend to have good written and oral communication skills, they are lacking in other such important leadership skills as planning and organization, problem solving and decision making, goal setting and prioritizing, time management, analysis, and financial planning and budgeting. These are some of the findings of a recent survey of public relations practitioners conducted by Judy VanSlyke Turk, APR, director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Kent State University.

In the survey, practitioners were asked to identify management skills and perspectives that they believe are essential, and to indicate which of those skills and perspectives are present or lacking in practitioners making the shift into management. The survey defined management skills as falling into two categories: leadership and "people-management" skills.

Questionnaires were mailed to 2,400 practitioners (all of the members of the Public Relations Society of America in Arkansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Texas) in December 1987 and January 1988. Completed questionnaires were returned by 561 public relations professionals.

Talking a good line

Communication skills are definitely perceived as being the most important leadership skills for public relations practitioners. Approximately 96 percent of respondents indicated that oral communication is important to effective public relations management, and 94 percent said written communication is vital. Apparently, these are also the skills in which most practitioners new to management's ranks excel: Only 16 percent of respondents said oral skills are lacking among new public relations managers within their organizations, and only 17 percent said that written skills are lacking.

But, while most (56 percent) respondents also ranked financial and budgeting skills as quite important, 67 percent said that these skills are lacking in new managers. The financial area is the only one in which a majority of respondents indicated that new public relations managers fall short.

Problem solving, decision making, and planning and organizing were cited as important by 91 percent of respondents. However, 46 percent of respondents say new managers lack problem-solving and decision-making skills and 40 percent lack planning and organizing abilities.

Respondents ranked people-management skills in the following order of importance: delegating (80 percent said this is vital), supervising (75 percent), negotiating (70 percent), group process

skills (69 percent), coaching and counseling (67 percent), staff development skills (63 percent), and performance evaluation skills (53 percent). However, respondents were not asked whether or not new public relations managers are proficient in any of these areas.

Marketing ups and downs

In addition to leadership and people-management skills, respondents were asked to rank the importance of various other functions and issues that are part of a public relations manager's role. Respondents put the most emphasis on the marketing function (rated somewhat or extremely important by 89 percent), followed by strategic planning (86 percent), ethical issues (76 percent), social

Leadership Skills

Skill	% Important	% Lacking
Oral communication	96	16
Written communication	94	17
Planning and organizing	91	40
Problem solving and decision making	91	46
Goal setting and prioritizing	83	44
Time management	80	39
Analytical skills	71	40
Financial and budgeting skills	56	67

Communication skills are of paramount importance for success as a new public relations manager, and most new managers have mastered these skills, according to a recent survey of practitioners. But new managers need to improve their financial, analytical, decision-making, and time-management skills, respondents say.

Function and Issue Understanding

Area or Issue	% Important	% Lacking
Marketing	89	34
Strategic planning	86	40
Ethical issues	76	18
Social responsibility considerations	73	21
Technological developments	59	35
First Amendment and other legal issues	37	30
Equal opportunity employment requirements	33	34
Labor relations	27	41

In order to be effective, public relations managers need to understand marketing, strategic planning, and ethics, practitioners say. Technology and labor relations are viewed as being less important.

responsibility issues (73 percent), and technological developments (59 percent). These were followed in importance by legal issues such as First Amendment considerations (37 percent), the equal employment requirement (33 percent), and labor relations (27 percent).

"People-Management" Skills

Skill	% Important
Delegating	80
Supervising	74
Negotiating	70
Group-process skills	69
Coaching and counseling	67
Staff-development skills	63
Performance-evaluation skills	53

Respondents ranked delegating, supervising, and negotiating as the most important "people-management" skills.

Among these functions and issues, new public relations managers, according to the survey, are most lacking in labor relations skills (41 percent say new managers fall short in this area), technological developments (35 percent), and marketing (34 percent).

Back to the blackboard

According to the public relations managers surveyed, new managers would be better prepared for their roles if they learned more business and non-communication skills in college. "Public relations [undergraduate] education successfully imparts communications skills at the expense of other skills and perspectives that also are essential to effective management," concludes Van Slyke. "Public relations educators should not default on their obligation to their students by 'passing the buck.' These skills must be taught as part of the public relations curriculum."

As a group, the survey respondents are relatively young (the largest subgroup was between 35 and 44 years old); have 13 years of public relations experience; have on average been in their current positions for 5½ years; and work in relatively large, privately owned, public relations counseling firms or corporations.



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